Reconnecting People with Place

The Potential of Heritage Transportation Corridors

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Long championed by landscape scholars and increasingly the focus of conservation efforts, heritage transportation corridors are now the topic of a major conference dedicated to more closely scrutinizing the opportunities and pitfalls of this preservation frontier.[1] In that spirit, this paper will reflect on several critical issues in the stewardship of heritage transportation corridors including their importance within the recent evolution of the preservation field, potential in contributing to a new national agenda of renewal and purpose along with an illustration of that potential—Jamaica Avenue and the "Magic Triangle," and finally, the readiness of the field for taking on the task.[2]

Heritage Transportation Corridors and the Recent Evolution of the Preservation Field

Passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 signaled the transition from the age of the individual building or site, valued for its associational importance and preserved and "restored" for exhibition purposes, to the era of historic districts or complexes, most often located in older towns or cities, representing a greater breadth of historical periods. Containing structures capable of being "recycled," historic district conservation largely supplanted "clear cutting" as the preferred approach to urban resuscitation.

By the 1980s, however, the nation had become predominately suburban in both settlement pattern and outlook. Shopping malls replaced the "Times Squares" and courthouse squares as the perceived centers of what were now more loosely knit communities. Back in the cities growing poverty, persistent racial tensions, and drugs and crime, accelerated by retraction of federal funding and magnified by the news media, overshadowed many of the reclamations achieved in the historic district age.

At the same time, farms and forests succumbed to sprinklings of houses, shopping centers, and even high-rise office buildings, as suburbs and rural countryside blurred into exurbia.[3] Now in the 1990s rural preservation, long a stepchild to urban preservation, is coming into its own. Alliances are being forged with environmentalists, and still another stage in heritage stewardship is in full swing.

Despite this succession of initiatives of the past quarter century, one often hears preservationists lament that conservation of the cultural heritage still only simmers on the back burner of public debate.[4] Perhaps, as some have suggested, this is a failed effort at public relations, or the inherited destiny of the United States and its "pioneering spirit," never to link memory and future. While there probably is some truth in both of these explanations, other factors have come into play as well, including the editing of landscape perception by new forms of transportation.

At one time travelers commonly experienced the built environment as a continuum when they rode along updated versions of ancient trails or on railroads that often paralleled them. Today the landscape is perceived as a series of "view bites," events, stops and landings. Cruising along the ground on super highways or high above in airways, it is possible to go from destination to destination with only a rapid and distant glimpse, for example, of where the poor live, the places products are made, or what was once the center of the city. Likewise, the so-called "products of preservation," historic districts, sites, complexes, and rural heritage areas, despite considerable efforts at interpretation, are still largely perceived by the public as isolated and unconnected events rather than being attached to a greater whole.

Though relatively little studied, this perceptual fragmentation has created a considerable education deficit, one that may well be contributing not only to the relative obscurity of the built environment as a public issue, but also to a national political climate where competing special interests hold sway instead of being channeled into a coherent national vision for the future.

Heritage Transportation Corridors: Reconnecting People with Place

This is where heritage transportation corridors come in. Heritage transportation corridors, by their very nature, are connectors—the "lay lines" along which culture and historical perception flow. Besides obvious economic benefits through tourism, if selected intelligently and interpreted dynamically, heritage transportation corridors have the potential for reconnecting people with place—for refastening them within the cultural chronology of landscapes long fractured by the limiting perspectives wrought by rail, highway and air travel.

Heritage transportation corridors also have the potential to:

- ameliorate racial and ethnic isolation;
- vivify collective historical imaginations;
- promote realistic images of the future;
- restore the element of cause and effect in the debate over environmental stewardship versus short-term growth;
- expand the political dialog over what constitutes infrastructure from merely bridges and highways to a far more diverse network of public improvements and investments.

The stewardship of heritage corridors also has the potential, perhaps more than any other preservation endeavor, to link conservation of the built environment to a much larger agenda of national renewal and purpose.

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While the length of this paper is limited to 10 minutes, I would like, nevertheless, to offer at least one illustration of the potential of heritage transportation corridors for contributing to at least some of these possible outcomes.

Jamaica Avenue and the Magic Triangle

The corridor I have chosen for this illustration is obscure compared to the famous passageways being showcased at this conference—the Oregon trail, the Lincoln highway, Route 66. It is formed by a road—snaking through seemingly forgotten neighborhoods in deepest Brooklyn and Queens in New York City—called Jamaica Avenue.

This former Native American trail, then colonial road, plank road and turnpike, now crisscrossed by a grid of sequentially-numbered streets, is darkened by an elevated railway. While at first glance this corridor, and the sites and structures lining it, might appear as a blighted jumble, a closer look reveals a treasure trove of information on the history of development, land use and cultural occupation, of a part of the nation's premier city.

One especially informative episode along the way is the area surrounding a pie-wedge shaped block, formed where Myrtle Avenue and the Long Island Railroad cut Jamaica Avenue on the diagonal, that I have unofficially christened "the Magic Triangle." Through close examination of the sites along the avenue and around the triangle—the arrangement and layering of roads, railroads, rapid transit, spaces, buildings designs, alterations, rooflines, churches, schools, place names, stores, signs, people, and many other clues, it is possible to decipher an entire rural-to-urban story.

These clues bear witness to the way in which this place evolved form a rural crossroads, station village, and railroad suburb, to its being swallowed up in the metropolitan area with the coming of the elevated railroad. Social change is revealed as well with evidence of Anglo, German, Italian, and most recently Asian and African American habitation.

In the spring of 1991, I was out with a camera crew trying to see if the story suggested by this evidence could be captured on video. I noticed an African American man intently watching us from a doorway as we aimed the camera at the roof above and behind him. He eventually inquired as to what we were shooting. I pointed out the ghostly form of a gable roof, swaddled in tar paper, barely visible behind the cornice of the commercial building where he was standing. "There could be an old farmhouse trapped inside that building," I said. He nodded somewhat quizzically. The crew and I packed up and changed locations.

About five minutes later the same man came running up to us and asked "was that house over there once a tavern?" He was referring to an Italianate house-like form, jutting up above a wall of plate glass storefronts and the entrance to a German hofbrau, all located at the apex of the triangle. He had, in fact, fastened on one of the visual Rosetta stones of the neighborhood. (The building was born a railroad station hotel in 1864, became an end-of-city stop off for weary wheelmen and wheelwomen during the bicycle craze, and ultimately was made into a hofbrau, replete with a sumptuous bar, intriguingly in the early 1920s at the height of prohibition. Now the aging owners, sons of the original hofbrau meister, are thinking about selling the place.)

Then the man paused for a moment, glanced down the curving ribbon of Jamaica avenue winding to a vanishing point in the direction of Brooklyn, cast his eyes back at the village tavern-cum-hofbrau and exclaimed, "Hum … this was once a small town. I was born in Bedford Stuyvesant down that way.[5] There must have been small towns around there too? Huh … all these places hook up!"

Thus the glimpse of that first tar-papered roofline, and the word "farmhouse," had triggered an analysis and synthesis of visual information that he (and millions of others) had taken in over a lifetime but had not fully digested … until now. This heritage transportation corridor, and its tangible text of cultural change, had redefined the city, and this man's place in space and time within it, forever.

From seeming overwhelming, the city could now begin to be understood as something which grew up incrementally. It was built by generations of different people. It could also be adapted, shaped and molded. Particularly informative elements also needed to be saved if cultural memory is to survive. In this brief encounter, history, culture, roots, and change had been fast-forwarded, replayed, and mentally connected.

A handful of preservationists in the neighborhood, with scant financial resources, trying to reinforce these connections, have installed interpretative plaques on the hofbrau, poignantly on a worn and stubby pole purported to be the last wooden horse-hitching post on Jamaica Avenue, and on a number of other sites scattered about the area. [6] One merchant even took interpretation a step further by having a mural painted on his business's outside sheet-metal security screen. Off hours, when the screen is rolled down and locked, the street is regaled with the image of the railroad station which once stood across the way.

The informative power of Jamaica Avenue and the "Magic Triangle" appears more difficult to discern from a country or city-wide perspective. The area is not protected by local ordinances nor is it listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A county-wide historic preservation guidebook fixes on one aspect of the area's history, the 1870s through 1890s, when developer Albon Platt Man transformed the surrounding farmland north of the village into a middle-class railroad suburb. It then dismisses the area because some of Man's houses " … built in fashionable shingle-style with Queen Ann touches … have been destroyed …" or "… replaced by apartment buildings."[7]

Historic Preservation: Is it Ready for the Task?

This leads to the question of how prepared is the preservation field for dealing with the complexities of identifying and conserving heritage corridors. The resolution of conflicting attitudes and methodologies from earlier stages in the field pose a considerable challenge. Champions of aesthetic beauty may, for example, wince

at proposals for keeping old gas stations or out-sized signs along a road like Route 66, even though these structures are critical informants of this great highway's history. The ghosts of Ruskin, Morris, and Viollet-le-Duc will also continue to haunt the field as decisions are made whether to conserve a corridor's layers of time or weed out those places which do not conform to a chosen context, theme, or period of significance.[8]

Even the long-standing practice of assigning historic sites, districts, and areas well-defined boundaries might not square with the need to preserve a corridor which might connect a string of cities and suburbs, and extend over long distances. Will there be pressure to conserve a few "safe and cuddly," and mostly small-town or rural episodes, rather than considering the whole? Will the field view the declaration of a corridor as a conceptual template to guide conservation over decades and even centuries, or will it engage in a few projects in the course of 10 or 20 years, lose patience, and then go on to something else?[9]

The issue of heritage transportation corridor conservation becomes even more difficult when viewed through a global perspective. Choosing corridors for the World Heritage List, for example, a sub-theme of this conference, involves the inevitable reduction of heritage to that which is still floating, or is expected to be floating on the surface of the world's conscienceness, after most everything else has sunk in time. When thinking at this scale, certainly Jamaica Avenue and the "Magic Triangle," and even the Erie Canal might pale when compared with, for example, the routes of the Crusades. It takes an agile mind to be able to think of heritage at varying scales, from local and regional to national and international; and clear vision to be committed to conserving them all at the same time, each on their own terms and for their own reasons.

It is my hope that these remarks, and the other papers presented at this conference, will ignite a rigorous debate over preservation philosophy and techniques for the conservation of heritage transportation corridors. Old approaches for identifying and managing historic sites, districts and rural heritage areas at all levels—international, national, regional, and local—must be rigorously scrutinized, adapted and amended, if the potential of heritage transportation corridors, for reconnecting people with place, is to be fully realized.

Notes

1 Some of the many works on corridors include George Stewart, *U.S. 40: Cross Section of the United States of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953); Robert Vogel, ed. *Report of the Mohawk Hudson Area Survey* (Washington D.C.: U.S.G.P.O., 1973); John Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor* (New Haven: Yale, 1983); Chester Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile* (Boston: Little Brown, 1985); Angus Gillespie, Michael Rockland, *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1989). Pioneering corridors conservation projects can be found in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New York, Texas, and other states.

2 For the purposes of this paper, my remarks are confined mostly to the United States, though many of the issues raised apply to other nations as well.

3 For an interesting account of this phenomenon see Joel Garreau, *Edge City* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).

4 See for example William Murtagh, "Janus Never Sleeps," in *Past Meets Future* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1992), p. 16.

5 The Bedford-Stuyvesant district in Brooklyn is one of New York City's major black ghettos.

6 A plaque was also placed on the house which stands on the site of the home of late-19th-century crime photographer and urban reformer Jacob Riis. The Riis connection opens up still another area of significance too lengthy to mention in this paper due to space limitations.

7 Jeffrey Kroessler, Nina Rappaport, *Historic Preservation in Queens* (Sunnyside, N.Y.: Queensborough Preservation League, 1990), p. 51. My citing of this book is not meant to be a criticism. The work contains excellent material and calls attention to Queens' cultural heritage, which has been largely overshadowed by Manhattan's and Brooklyn's. I do suggest that by examining only sites and districts, and not corridors, the traditional approach taken in this and countless other works, places of significance will inevitably be overlooked.

8 For a concise account read William Chapman, "William Morris and the Anti-Scrape Society," *Heritage* (Summer 1990), pp. 6-13.

9 See Frank Popper, Deborah Popper, "Where the Buffalo Used to Roam," *The Boston Globe* (September 27, 1992), for an excellent illustration of the power of a broad declaration of a landscape vision for the future.

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